Modality effects in nominal possessive constructions: The 'his genitive' in signed and spoken languages

Many researchers have noticed striking parallels between creoles and natural signed languages used by Deaf communities (Fischer 1978, 2000, Aronoff et al. 2005, Newport & Supalla 2000). Such similarities include lack of a copula, rich aspect marking but lack of tense marking, and use of the verb 'have' for existence (Fischer 1978). Also like creole speakers, the vast majority of sign language users (90-95%) typically do not acquire their language natively (Mitchell & Karchmer 2004), as most deaf children are born to hearing parents who do not sign. In this presentation we explore possessive marking in signed languages and its relationship to creoles and other spoken languages.

In British Sign Language (BSL), possession can be expressed in several ways. A possessive pronoun which may precede or follow the possessed noun as in (1) and (2) below. For nominal possession, the possessor is named either with the possessive pronoun and possessum following (PR POSS PM) as in (3) or via juxtaposition with the possessum as in (4). These same patterns have been documented for other signed languages as well, including American, Croatian, Austrian and Australian Sign Languages (Pichler et al. 2008; Johnston & Schembri 2007).

(1) POSS BOOK
    'his/her book'

(2) BOOK POSS
    'his/her book'

(3) BOY POSS BOOK
    boy   his   book
    'the boy's book'

(4) BOY BOOK
    'the boy's book'

The construction in (3) - possessor, possessive pronoun, possessum (PR POSS PM) - is very similar to what has been referred to as the 'his genitive' in Germanic languages. This construction occurred only for a very brief period in the latter part of Middle English (Janda 1980, Allen 2002); it is still common in colloquial Dutch, German and Norwegian (Weerman & de Wit 1999, Krause 1999, Delsing 1998). The more standard way of marking possession in these languages is via genitive case marker or possessive affix.

In Afrikaans, the 'his genitive' is standard for expressing possession (Oosthuizen & Waher 1994) and within Atlantic creoles it is claimed to be universal (Holm 1990). Thus the languages is which the PR POSS PM construction is standardly used include spoken creoles and signed languages. This appears to be yet another way in which signed languages and creoles are very similar.

Given the more colloquial usage of the 'his genitive' in established languages like German, Dutch, and Norwegian, one might expect that in creoles, over time, this

construction might be lost through cliticisation or might be similarly sidelined. Might we expect the same for signed languages? We argue that the PR POSS PM construction in signed languages is much more likely to remain a standard way of expressing possession than in spoken creoles. To support this argument, we explore phonological and morphological processes such as affixation, cliticisation, assimilation and coalescence within signed languages. We conclude by noting that although signed languages clearly have all properties of human language and are also very similar to spoken creoles, the visual-spatial modality of signed languages will always have some effects on their structure.

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